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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM CBS Morning News

STATION WDM-TV
CBS Network

DATE June 6, 1984 7:00 A.M.

CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT President Reagan/D-Day At Normandy

DIANE SAWYER: The President is joining Walter Cronkite now on the beaches at Normandy, and we're going to go there and join them ourselves.

WALTER CRONKITE: Mr. President, it's quite a day out here. We're observing the fact that American soldiers can do the impossible, as represented here at Point Du Hoc, when they're commanded to. But on the other hand, at a terrible cost, isn't it?

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: Yes. As I said in my remarks, 225 of them came up those cliffs, and two days later there were only 90 of them able to take part in combat.

CRONKITE: Mr. President, you know, this war -- World War II, that is -- was called a popular war, as opposed to the actions we've had recently, Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, I suppose. What are the conditions it takes to have a popular war, for heaven sakes?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Well, I doubt that any war could be -- if we really describe it, can be popular. No one wants it. But here was a case in which the issues of right and wrong were so clearly defined and delineated before we even got into war. And then, we didn't choose to pull the trigger. The trigger was pulled at us. And we were in a war as of a Sunday morning, December 7th, in the Pacific.

And I think I'll always remember my first assignment as a reserve officer called to active duty was at the port of embarkation in San Francisco, and it was a job as a liaison officer loading the convoys for out in the Pacific. And standing at the

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foot of the gangplank one day as they're coming along, full pack and gear and everything, ready to go up the gangplank, and one of them -- there was a pause, a hitch in the line. One standing there, just a youngster, and I said, "How do you feel?"

"Well," he said, "I don't want to go." He said, "None of us want to go. But," he said, "we all know the shortest way home is through Tokyo."

CRONKITE: You know, now we're in a nuclear age. And as terrible as this war was, is it possible in a nuclear age that we would have another war that could be restricted to anything as horrible as this, even?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Walter, I have said and will continue to say a nuclear war cannot be won. It must never be fought. And this is why the goal must be to rid the world once and for all of those weapons.

CRONKITE: You don't think we could fight a strategic war like this without invoking nuclear weapons.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Well, this we don't know. But if it was ever to resort to those weapons -- we did in World War II. We saw the power deterrence. All the nations had chemical warfare, had gas. But it was never used because everyone had it. Maybe the same thing would apply with regard to nuclear war. But why take that chance?

If everybody is having the weapons as a deterrent to the other, then let's do away with the deterrence.

CRONKITE: You had some remarks, that I don't think you got a chance to deliver in a foreshortened speech in Ireland, in which you said that you were optimistic that perhaps we could get nuclear limitation talks going again with the Soviets. What gives you cause for that optimism?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: I just think common sense. I think right now the Soviet Union is -- well, there was an article in The Economist that sort of described it. They're hibernating. We're so used to thinking that they're always in the midst of some kind of devious plan. I just don't think they have any answers right now, and they're sort of hunkered down, trying to decide.

CRONKITE: Do we have a plan?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Yes. And the plan is to -- we have maintained contact. We're negotiating other things of mutual interest to the two countries, making some progress on them. But

on those talks, my idea of a goal is if we can once start down the road of achieving reductions in the armaments, I just have to believe that we'll see the common sense in continuing down the road and eliminating them.

CRONKITE: Have you had a chance, with your busy schedule on this tour, to catch up with the fact that the Soviets, on this anniversary, the 40th anniversary of D-Day, are making much of the fact that they've cited before -- a fact, I mean, by their [unintelligible], or the fiction -- that we deliberately delayed this landing by two years in order that the Germans would eat up the Soviets by attrition, and that we came ashore virtually unopposed because of connivance with the Germans? Have you heard that they were repeating that all over...

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Oh, I know that. As a matter of fact, recently our ceremony for the funeral of the Unknown Soldier from Vietnam, they referred to that as a militaristic orgy.

I sometimes wonder...

[Confusion of voices]

PRESIDENT REAGAN: I wonder sometimes, when they talk about heated rhetoric coming from me, doesn't anyone listen to what they're saying?

But how anyone could say that this was an almost unopposed landing, we know better. And the evidence is right here and the survivors, many of them, are right here.

They had not won the war, and we had not delayed for any reason of that kind. I have some reason for saying that because my own war service was spent in a unit that was directly under Air Corps Intelligence, and we had access to all the intelligence information about things, even including this. And there was an awful lot of war to be fought.

CRONKITE: And as a matter of fact, 40,000 airmen gave their lives over Europe. I covered the Air Force as a correspondent and I think of that. When you talk about 10,000 dying here on D-Day, 40,000 died in order to get the Luftwaffe out of the skies before D-Day, or this wouldn't have been possible.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Yes.

CRONKITE: Let me ask you one more question before you have to go.

Speaking of wars and the political campaign, what's your plan for D-Day against Mondale, Hart, [unintelligible]?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Just tell them what we've done and what we're going to do, and pretend they're not there.

CRONKITE: Well, you may have to climb a 100-foot cliff, but I guess you've got your weapons at your ready.

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Yes.

CRONKITE: Thank you very much, Mr. President.